Kintsugi

Kintsugi (金継ぎ, "golden joinery"), also known as ***kintsukuroi*** (金繕い, "golden repair"),[1] is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum, a method similar to the *maki-e* technique.[2][3][4] As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.[5]

Repair work (right) on Mishima ware *hakeme*-type tea bowl with *kintsugi* gold lacquer, 16th century

Small repair (top) on Nabeshima ware dish with hollyhock design, overglaze enamel, 18th century, Edo period

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Origin

Lacquerware is a longstanding tradition in Japan,[6][7] and at some point *kintsugi* may have been combined with *maki-e* as a replacement for other ceramic repair techniques. While the process is associated with Japanese craftsmen, the technique was also applied to ceramic pieces of other origins including China, Vietnam, and Korea.[8]

Kintsugi became closely associated with ceramic vessels used for *chanoyu* (Japanese tea ceremony).[3] One theory is that *kintsugi* may have originated when Japanese *shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshimasa sent a damaged Chinese tea bowl back to China for repairs in the late 15th century. When it was returned, repaired with ugly metal staples, it may have prompted Japanese craftsmen to look for a more aesthetically pleasing means of repair.[9] Collectors became so enamored of the new art that some were accused of deliberately smashing valuable pottery so it could be repaired with the gold seams of *kintsugi*. [2] It is also possible that a pottery piece was chosen for deformities it had acquired during production, then deliberately broken and repaired, instead of being trashed. [2] On the other hand, according to Bakōhan Saōki (record of tea-bowl with a 'large-locust' clamp), such "ugliness" was considered inspirational and Zen-like, as it connoted beauty in broken things. The bowl became valued even more highly because of these large metal staples, which looked like a locust, and the bowl was named *'bakōhan* ("large-locust clamp").[10]

Philosophy

As a philosophy, *kintsugi* is similar to the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, an embracing of the flawed or imperfect.[11][12] Japanese aesthetics values marks of wear from the use of an object. This can be seen as a rationale for keeping an object around even after it has broken and as a justification of *kintsugi* itself, highlighting the cracks and repairs as simply an event in the life of an object rather than allowing its service to end at the time of its damage or breakage, and can be seen as a variant of the adage "Waste not, want not".[13]

Goryeo wine ewer with gold lacquer repair. It was repaired by a Japanese collector in the early 20th century.

Kintsugi can relate to the Japanese philosophy of *mushin* (無心, "no mind"), which encompasses the concepts of non-attachment, acceptance of change, and fate as aspects of human life.[14]

> Not only is there no attempt to hide the damage, but the repair is literally illuminated... a kind of physical expression of the spirit of mushin....Mushin is often literally translated as "no mind," but carries connotations of fully existing within the moment, of non-attachment, of equanimity amid changing conditions. ...The vicissitudes of existence over time, to which all humans are susceptible, could not be clearer than in the breaks, the knocks, and the shattering to which ceramic ware too is subject. This poignancy or aesthetic of existence has been known in Japan as mono no aware, a compassionate sensitivity, or perhaps identification with, [things] outside oneself.
>
> — Christy Bartlett, *Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics*

Types of joinery

There are a few major styles or types of *kintsugi*:

- Crack (ひび), the use of gold dust and resin or lacquer to attach broken pieces with minimal overlap or fill-in from missing pieces
- Piece method (欠けの金継ぎ例), where a replacement ceramic fragment is not available and the entirety of the addition is gold or gold/lacquer compound
- Joint call (呼び継ぎ), where a similarly shaped but non-matching fragment is used to replace a missing piece from the original vessel creating a patchwork effect[15]

Related techniques

Staple repair is a similar technique used to repair broken ceramic pieces,[16] where small holes are drilled on either side of a crack and metal staples are bent to hold the pieces together.[17] Staple repair was used in Europe (in ancient Greece, England and Russia among others) and China as a repair technique for particularly valuable pieces.[17]

Influence on modern art

Kintsugi is the general concept of highlighting or emphasizing imperfections, visualizing mends and seams as an additive or an area to celebrate or focus on, rather than absence or missing pieces. Modern artists experiment with the ancient technique as a means of analyzing the idea of loss, synthesis, and improvement through destruction and repair or rebirth.[18]

While originally ignored as a separate art form, *kintsugi* and related repair methods have been featured at exhibitions at the Freer Gallery at the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.[2][8][12][19]

Nanking reticulated basket, c. 1750, mended with metal staples

See also

- Mending
- Conservation and restoration of cultural heritage
- Conservation and restoration of paintings
- Conservator-restorer
- Darning – Sewing technique for repairing holes or worn areas in fabric or knitting using needle and thread
- Wabi-sabi – School of aesthetic Japanese thought centred around the appreciation of imperfect, incomplete and transient beauty
- Āina-kāri – Persian type of interior decoration with cut mirrors

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Further reading

- Christy, James; Holland, Henry; Bartlett, Charly Iten (2008). *Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics*. Herbert Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. ASIN B009F3YENM (https://www.amazon.com/dp/B009F3YENM).

External links

- Video: "Kintsugi: The Art of Repairing and Bringing New Life to Broken Items" (https://www.linktv.org/shows/made-by-hand/kintsugi-the-art-of-broken-pieces) from Link TV
- Exhibition *FLICKWERK The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics* (http://museum.cornell.edu/exhibitions/aesthetics-mended-japanese-ceramics) at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca NY 2008
- Kintsugi: The Art of Broken (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-uZiszbo7M) by Audrey Harris | TEDxJanpath (video on YouTube)
- Kintsugi: The Meaning of Mending (https://vimeo.com/54219830) by Adam Fulford (https://vimeo.com/adamfulford) (video on Vimeo)
- EASTERN PHILOSOPHY - Kintsugi (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBUTQkaSSTY) by School of Life (http://www.theschooloflife.com%7CThe) (video on YouTube)

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